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ABSTRACT

Innovative curricular reforms in language instruction at an inner-city experimental high school are described in this article. The primary concern for flexibility in enrollment procedures, language offerings, planning of learning opportunities, and, in general, the total curriculum, is prompted by the recognition of individual differences and needs among students. Changes made in language laboratory design and use, development of skills courses, and use of learning packets are described in this article. Community and student attitudes toward language instruction in public schools, derived from a Louis Harris poll, are commented on and underscore the need for relevant educational program development. (RL)

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STUDENT INVOLVEMENT, FLEXIBILITY AND INDIVIDUALIZATION

by Donald Ryberg

Marshall-University High School in Minneapolis is an inner-city experimental school with a widely diverse student population and staff...The school's experimental bent combined with its vocal students and its association with a major university have made it an interesting and challenging place to work, albeit not easy. The FL department's primary objective is to provide the best possible FL learning program to meet the various needs of the students. This means striving for maximum flexibility in all aspects. The staff has concentrated its concerns for flexibility in the five general areas of enrollment, language choices, the learning process, facilities and the total curriculum.

All FL programs are open to any student who desires to study a language to whatever level of proficiency he may be able to reach. There are no prerequisites,

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nor do students have to be continuously enrolled within a prescribed language sequence or normal class grouping.

In order to expose as many students as possible to the process of language learning and ideas of cultural differences, all 7th and 8th graders are scheduled into FL classes, just as all 7th and 8th graders are scheduled into English or Social Studies classes. The major goals of the initial FL learning experience are to make it as pleasant and exciting as possible and to promote open and accepting attitudes towards members of other language-speaking groups. To these ends, 100% of the students at M-UHS will have some FL learning experiences. It is hoped that perhaps 75% of all students will be enrolled regularly. At present approximately 60% are enrolled in FL classes.

At present, M-UHS offers French, German, Russian and Spanish on a regular basis. There are plans being made to allow students to study infrequently taught languages as soon as self-study programs are available. In addition, it is possible for students to enroll in language courses at the University of Minnesota with special permission.

Once each student has chosen a language, the problem of flexibility becomes largely a problem for the classroom teacher. Built-in flexibility such as schedules, materials, use of space, and so forth is still in the planning stages. However, the real key to flexibility and expanding programs always lies with the individual teacher.

One example of flexibility in the learning process adopted by several teachers is the use of multiple text materials. Rather than tying learning to the method of one series, students make initial explorations into a variety of available texts (available in the Curriculum Section of the FL Resource Center). Experience shows that students distribute themselves rather evenly among a variety of traditional, audio-lingual, direct method, and eclectic materials. The result is that the same unit of learning may be seen from different viewpoints, at different times, and with different emphases. Students who like to translate may translate, those who like to sample from all sources are able to.

Another example of learning flexibility within the normal classroom setting is decreased contact time per student per week. There is expert opinion which states that people listen with only about 25% effectiveness. By grouping and personalizing instructional programs and by making subject matter relevant to individual student needs and interests, contact time is likely to be used more effectively. Thus, many intermediate and upper-level language classes at Marshall-University High are grouped in numerous ways, allowing students to miss class on specified days or for parts of class periods. It is felt that given carefully programmed homework or Resource Center assignments, the students progress faster and with more enthusiasm, in spite of the fact that they may meet as little as 15 or 20 minutes per day or perhaps only two standard class periods per week.

A third example of flexibility within the standard classroom is individual pacing. Individual pacing may mean dismissing students early when they complete work or giving them extra credit work. It may also mean allowing students to progress as quickly as they complete their work, even though some students may never go beyond the basic level. While this may sould impractical or even chaotic to experienced teachers, it recognizes facts of life which may be observed in any group of students. It seems advisable to make credits flexible, too, if this plan is undertaken. At M-UHS credits may be entered on students' records four times per year, normally at the rate of one credit per semester. It is entirely possible to earn three or even four credits per year -- it is also possible to earn one or one and a half.

The main building of M-UHS, in which the FL classrooms are located, is about 45 years old. It has big old square classrooms with rows of carved and battered desks. The rooms are ugly and inflexible, the corridors are dark and depressing. The physical changes made to date have been relatively few and inexpensive.

The first change made was to rip out the old language laboratory, a lockstep audio-active facility. It was updated and rearranged into a library-type facility usable for individual study, for small group instruction, or for total class use. This 22-position laboratory is now the hub of the FL Resource Center. Carrels have desk tops which lift up to reveal simple and inexpensive casette-type tape recorders, which may be quickly interchanged if damaged. The carrels may be used either for conventional study or as audio-active-record laboratory positions.

Surrounding the electronic carrels is a large and growing collection of resource materials in all of the languages which are taught. These materials include all available textbook sequences, supplementary readers, literary works, reference books, newspapers and periodicals, records, tapes of all descriptions, films, filmstrips, slides, occupational and study guides, cookbooks, songbooks, cultural readers, maps and assorted realia. Most copies of materials were publishers' examination copies. Of course, viewing and listening equipment is provided.

Several small group study and conversation areas are separated from each other by bookshelves. At capacity the room will accommodate approximately 35 students -- a minimal number at best -- working at widely diverse activities.

One of the most important features of the room is the carpeting. A multi-use room must have good accoustical treatment or its very purpose is defeated by the noise level. Carpeting not only makes the room more attractive, but is probably the best acoustical treatment for the price.

In addition to Resource Center facilities, two of the regular classrooms have been carpeted so that individualized and group projects may be carried on simultaneously. One room is equipped with an overhead electronic lab and the other has a portable unit. In the future, the language staff hopes to have portable units for each classroom, movable screens and partitions, and carpeting.

The FL staff's major efforts this year are centered on the development of a number of Interest and Skills courses for intermediate and advanced students. As they expected, students who were involved with them in helping to set up programs wanted courses in which language served as a tool for learning. The final result was a group of courses with many possibilities for interdisciplinary activities. Language learning was felt to be best accomplished by means of relevant and interesting subject matter and practical activities.

In the beginning, before the idea of elective "mini-courses" was firmly shaped, several staff members were looking for ideas to individualize instruction. The Unipac or individual learning package concept was gaining in popularity, but there weren't many available and topics prepared were not overly exciting. Therefore, students in several advanced classes were asked to list the ten most interesting areas of study they could think of in German. Two advanced groups came up with about 60 possibilities ranging from German cooking and Popular Music to Advanced Grammar and Introduction to German Literature.

At this point teachers analyzed the list carefully, combined topics that appeared to be similar, modified a few to make them more suitable to available materials, and added a number of topics which they felt might be appropriate but unknown to their students. From this master list students were asked to choose

their favorites -- ranking them in order of appeal from one to five. From the rankings came the basis for the "mini-course" or "elective-within-an-elective" program. It was a short step to formalizing the program -- with, of course, the realization that formalization could bring its own kind or rigidity.

Until the program is scheduled as an official part of the curriculum, a considerable number of topics are being studied this year as pilot courses. For the present, they are being offered within regular class periods according to self-selecting groups who attend class when their interest areas are being considered, either during parts of normal class periods or on certain days of the week. This means that there is already much flexibility even without special schedules. An interesting sidelight is that some students chose not to choose -- in other words, they didn't want to miss any of the possibilities, so they are involved in all.

Courses are aimed either at satisfying interests or developing skills. Some of the offerings are:

1. Travel courses in each language. Using guidebooks, history books, slides and films, students study the geography, people and culture of the country or region of their language, and plan a personal trip they would like to make.
2. France (Germany, Spain, Russian, etcetera) Today. A study of the similarities and differences between a foreign culture and the American one, centering around such topics as the family, youth, education, social classes, food, relaxation, religion, and government. There is also a special course in "The French Canadians."
3. Skills Workshops, Grammar Review Courses, and Reading or Listening Skill Courses. For students who want to develop certain or all skills, or simply want to set up an independent reading or listening course with self-selected materials. Diagnostic tests (June 1970 Newsletter) are administered and students are given special help in the areas of weakness.
4. Conversation and Correspondence Courses. Discussions centering around personal interests, as well as special situations (taxi, airport, restaurant, etc.) Courses are also offered in formal, business, and personal letter-writing; pen-pal and summer job contacts are made.
5. Scientific German Through Films. The specialized language of psychology, physics, biology, chemistry, or special areas selected by students, are explored in films, sound track, and scripts. There is also a course in Technical Russian.
6. News Media. A study of the news media and their influence and operation in Germany. In Russian, a student reads such publications as Pravda, Izvestia, and Krokodil, and compares information and propaganda content with American newspapers. A German course in journalism skills produces a newsletter.
7. Test Taking. A course showing how to improve test scores in Spanish SAT and placement tests.
8. Political Independence and the Struggle for Power in South America. A study of Latin American revolutions, American involvement and influence, and their domestic and international effects.
9. German Cooking. Practical food preparation is optional, but German etiquette, meal planning, and nutrition, as well as food and meal preparation and customs are studied.

In addition, an introductory "mini-course" in Comparative Linguistics, is designed to show students some basic linguistic and methodological principles. It compares and contrasts the languages taught, and credit is given for the language being studied.

Thus, Total Curricular Flexibility means relevance to students' needs, objectives, and interests. It means making language a practical tool for information gathering. It means possibilities for interdisciplinary study. It means student involvement in course planning and organization.

The first decision a teacher must make is whether he is willing to overturn the "tried and true." Usually, the fact that he is considering the problem is an indication that there is a felt need beyond the normal revamping and revitalizing which every teacher does as a matter of habit.

Once the decision has been made, a tremendous expenditure of time and effort must be made. Planning with students is slow and time consuming, for they are not often experienced in charting their own goals. Yet this use of time can prove to be the factor determining the ultimate success of any changes made.

Combing all available texts, readers, and native sources for pertinent and relevant readings and background information also requires much time and effort. Once suitable sources have been found, much further effort must be put forth to adapt them to the language levels of students involved.

Often, the decision must be made that student-teacher contact time per week must be reduced. However, given materials and topics for study which are vital to students, contact time may be much more valuable than it has ever been before. It is the quality of time, not the quantity, that is important. Of course, careful attention to the details of programing homework, availability of resource materials, and of conference or discussion time all help raise quality.

The teacher who wishes to become more flexible should consider carefully the ideas of broadening his instructional objectives beyond the traditional four skills approach of the 1960's to the more generalized goals of (1) learning how to learn foreign languages, and (2) sensitivity to differing cultural values and concepts. It is somewhat presumptuous for schools to decide for students that the languages offered are the ones that students will need to learn later in life. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that learning one FL aids the learning of subsequent languages. Acknowledgment of this fact and helping students gain insight into the processes of learning may be every bit as important to a student's future as the learning of skills in a single language. In like manner, sensitivity to other cultures of the world may be promoted by means of the study of one particular culture.

A teacher who wishes to become more flexible must also weigh the consequences of breaking up the long-sequence concept of language learning so carefully developed during the 1960's. In theory the concept is based on the idea that there is a logical sequence and that moving from step to step will produce learning in an efficient manner. In practice it has often meant years of study in nearly identical texts using nearly identical methods until the student is so turned off by the tedium that he drops out. If the theory has worked well in a particular language program with a minimal drop out rate, then there is no need to consider change. However, statistics generally indicate that a very small percentage of students who begin language study actually finish the upper levels. The reasons for dropping out need to be studied carefully.

Flexibility has become a key word for the FL Staff at Marshall-University High School. The particular forms it has taken are probably not suitable for every school, teacher, or student, but the idea of flexibility is nevertheless valid everywhere. While M-UHS programs are still in developmental stages, the drop-out rate is less than before and is certainly far less than in other schools in the area. The very notion of adopting FLEXIBILITY as a key word of course implies that adaptation and improvement are never-ending processes.

WE ALWAYS HAVE TO HAVE THE LAST WORD....

In the Louis Harris poll on public education published in the May 16, 1969 issue of LIFE, FLs received the highest score in the category of "needing changes to improve quality," and also received high marks in the following: least useful, most boring, most difficult, and most irrelevant. Obviously we must make some form of positive response to this situation, and it may just be a matter of survival rather than choice, for we suspect that most remaining FL requirements will soon be discarded.

The response Marshall-University High School has made is one constructive approach among several possibilities, but the qualifications Mr. Ryberg discusses need to be clarified in greater detail. Some other portions of the Harris poll point us in very specific directions:

> "Almost universally, [the students'] interest centered on the teacher....[They] define a good teacher in terms of teaching style, and good teaching [as] virtually synonymous with good education....
> Invariably, students get back to describing successful learning experiences in terms of relationships with good teachers (one who has a sense of humor, and who 'listens and understands....doesn't go by the book....encourages discussions and participation....gives responsibility....is free and open with [students] and is interested in [them] as people.')[2] They want relationships which are open, honest, interesting, exciting. They are really asking for relationships that are flexible, classrooms that are flexible, and teachers who are flexible."[3]

Conversely, a bad teacher is described as one who has "no sense of humor.... doesn't listen....lectures too much, goes by the book....thinks she knows it all...[4] too strict, cold, and impersonal....[and] doesn't let students express opinions." And, presumably, bad learning experiences are associated with bad teachers. Study after study confirms this supposition, that in fact student confidence, enjoyment, and performance depend significantly on teacher expectations and teacher-student interactions. Given, then, the importance of affective factors in classroom learning, we must examine our professional response.

It had been a truism in the profession for many years that it is the teacher who makes or breaks an FL program, but we have always avoided explicit recognition of those teachers who do break programs. Instead we shift the blame to the learner or the situation, and call for longer sequences or a "method", or THE method, that we implicitly hope will help those teachers salvage a program and save their professional lives. The results in all cases have been unsatisfactory, but we have avoided the issue further by placing the blame on the ineffective application of the method rather than on the psychology of method-finding itself (cf. the defences of audiolingualism in the Reports of the past Northeast Conferences and some crtiques of the Pennsylvania Report.)

We must get out from under this delusion. There is no savior coming, or to put it more accurately, salvation is an individual act. There cannot be a profession-

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[2] Harris, Louis, "The Life Poll concerning What People Think About Their High Schools," Life, May 16, 1969, p. 30.
[3] Hoye, A.G., "Flexibility--From Folly to Promise," Speech given at Secondary-School Foreign-Language Symposium, Bloomington, Indiana, October 7, 1969. pps. 9-10
[4] Op. cit., Life, p. 30.

wide response, and, significantly, the group discussing individualization at the Seattle Symposium described it in terms of an "attitude" rather than a method or program. Their distinction jibes with the implicit judgment of the students in the Harris poll who not only rejected teaching by TV or film, but were also overwhelmingly disinterested in questions of curriculum or methodology. Instead their concerns centered around the lack of meaningful or exciting personal contact with teachers.

This leads one to confront the most basic condition underlying formal education: boredom is rampant, and is the daily fact of life for almost everyone in schools. True, there are some who enjoy the work, and there are some who have nothing they would prefer to do, but most teachers, students, and (yes, even) administrators would leave the building in a flash if they could. And even if Ivan Illich were to become Commissioner of Education at the USOE (unlikely at best), it is not probable that this condition would change; the system has acquired its own dynamic, and one of the reasons is that we have allowed the mechanics of classroom operation to become the substance of education and the justification of schooling itself. Among boring courses, FLs rank very high, but, with the cries for "language as communication," our professional response is beginning to make sense: at advanced levels some FL teachers are now moving into group interaction, conversation, and topics that are of possible interest to high school students.

Programs of individualization facilitate this response and open up possibilities that cannot exist in a standard or lockstep curriculum. But we hesitate in considering it as a "method" or magic nostrum to guarantee increased student interest, language learning, or enrollment; FLs suffer too much from supposed cures already.

Individualization can minimize teacher-student frustrations and misunderstandings; can allow all students to learn more effectively; can help with problems of articulation and placement; and can add more meaning to FL programs and maximize use of expensive language labs and audio-visual equipment. But there are several prerequisites.

The first is that there be an actual FL program rather than a simple text or publisher's series. It is not enough to tell a student that he may look forward to more of the same after one or two years of instruction -- but all at his own rate! The need for a program necessiates cooperation among the FL teachers and students of a school or district, much time and effort spent in planning, and a capacity to change these plans over a long or short period of time if the need arises.

The second prerequisite lies in the teacher's attitude. There is little to say here definitively. We have all seen competent and good teachers frown repeatedly when a "slow" student answers a question and smile at "bright" students even when they do not answer. Other teachers classify students as, for instance, "A" or "B" students after a week or so in the class, and, when the pupils hand in "A" or "B" work, believe solely in the accuracy of their own perceptions. Fortunately individualization forces its own terms to a greater degree than most other curricular set-ups, but it appears it will be more successful for teachers who are self-confident in close relations with students and feel comfortable in dealing with apparently chaotic situations. But perhaps most importantly it works best with teachers who shy away from reacting with students in normative or relative terms; treating a student as a "C" student negates the whole proposition that he is an individual by placing him in a context, and negates his learning potential as well. Individualization, in short, answers some of the felt needs of the students polled by Harris, and it might save and serve good teachers. But it will only compound the problems of bad teachers and bad teaching. But if these conditions hold true, we do feel that individualization may constitute a breakthrough or turning point in FL instruction. The program at Marshall-University High School, Nathan Hale or Chief Sealth in

Seattle, or Lake Washington in Kirkland are very probably not appropriate for any other schools, even though they are good programs. This is very encouraging, for it is the attitude--not of finding acceptable alternatives to the present systems, but rather of finding alternatives acceptable--that is all-important and deserves to be promoted.